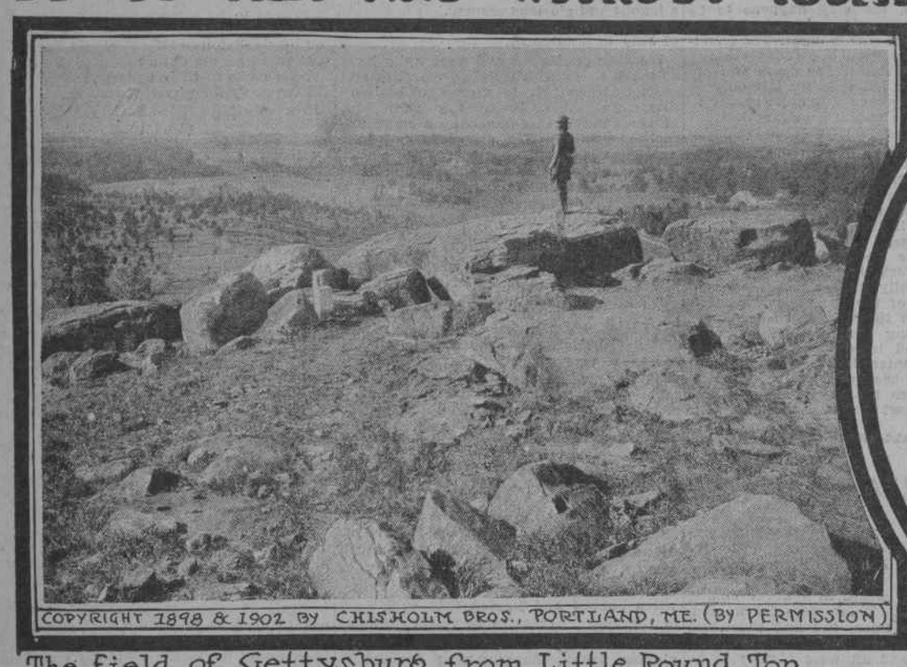
AMERICANS ANALYZED by BRANDER MATTHEWS

HE REFUTES THE CHARGE THAT THEY ARE MERE MONEY MAKERS, ANTAGONISTIC TO ART AND WITHOUT IDEALS.



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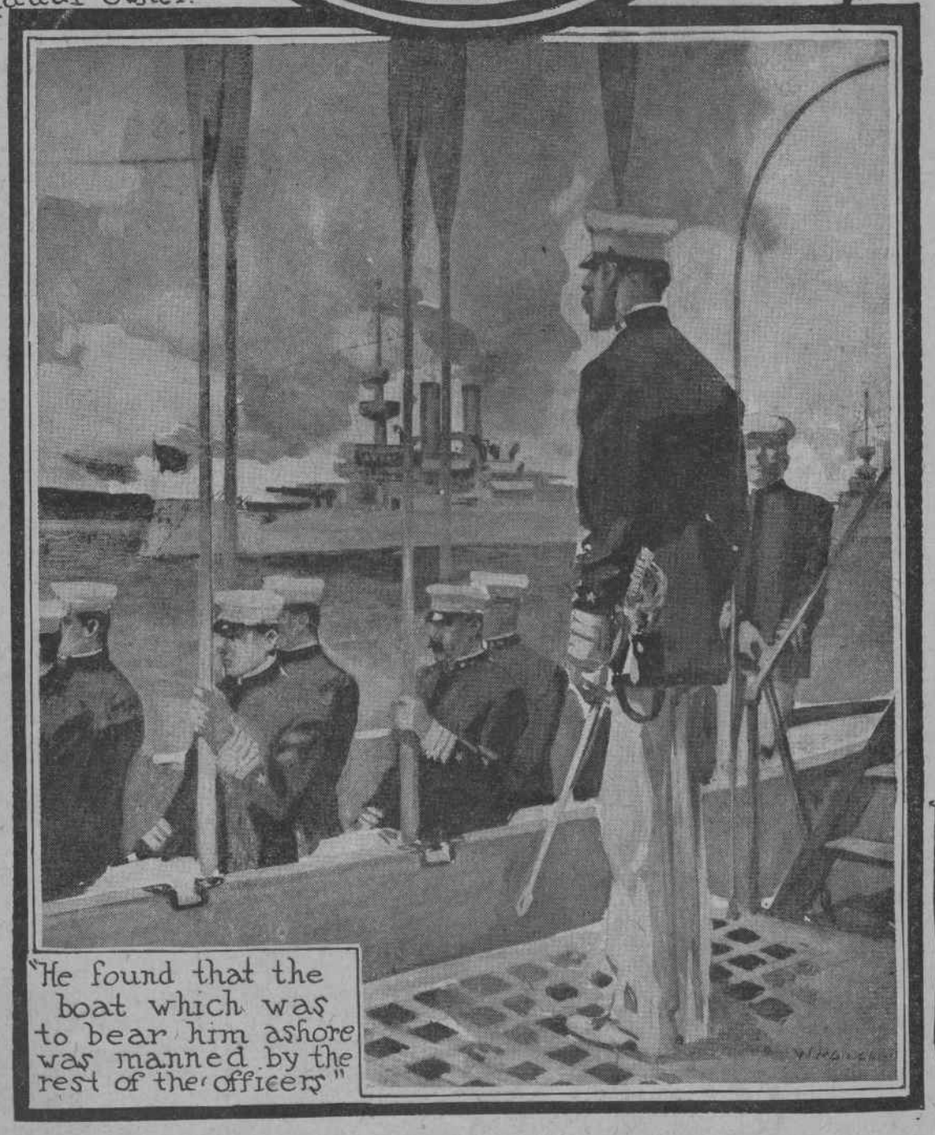
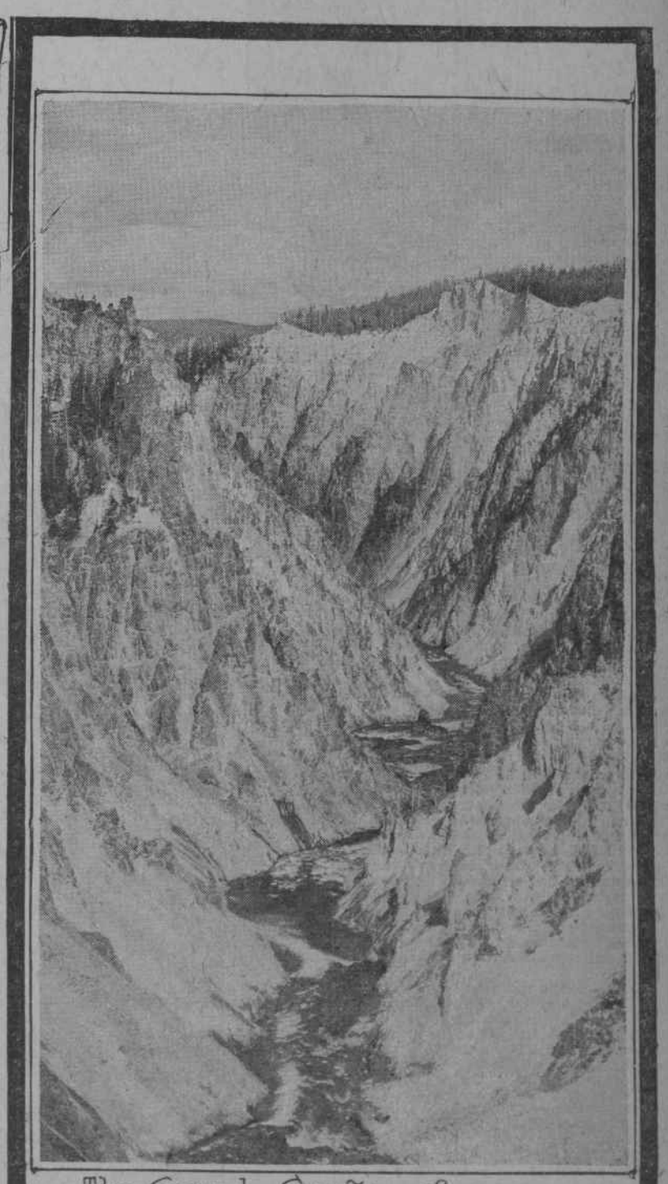
The field of Gettysburg from Little Round Top
"Free from the despoiling hand of any individual owner."



"He found that the boat which was to bear him ashore was manned by the rest of the officers"



The Grand Canon of the Yellowstone
"The people have ordained the preservation of this natural beauty"

["American Character" is the title of a very interesting and timely article by Professor Brander Matthews, which appears in the current issue of the Columbia University Quarterly. Following it will be found in part.]

IN a volume recording a series of talks with Tolstoy, put forth by a French writer in the final months of 1904, we are told that the Russian novelist thought the Doukhobors had attained to a perfected life, in that they were simple, free from envy, wrath and ambition, detesting violence, refraining from theft and murder, and seeking ever to do good. Then the Parisian interviewer asked which of the peoples of the world seemed most remote from the perfection to which the Doukhobors had elevated themselves, and when Tolstoy returned that he had given no thought to this question the French correspondent suggested that we Americans deserved to be held up to scorn as the least worthy of nations.

The tolerant Tolstoy asked his visitor why he thought so ill of us, and the journalist of Paris then put forth the opinion that we Americans are "a people terribly practical, avid of pleasure, systematically hostile to all idealism. The ambition of the American's heart, the passion of his life, is money; and it is rather a delight in the conquest and possession of money than in the use of it. The Americans ignore the arts, they despise disinterested beauty. And now, moreover, they are imperialists. They could have remained peaceful without danger to their national existence, but they had to have a fleet and an army. They set out after Spain and attacked her, and now they begin to defy Europe. Is there not something scandalous in this revelation of the conquering appetite in a new people with no hereditary predisposition toward war?"

It is to the credit of the French correspondent that after setting down this fervid arraignment he was honest enough to record Tolstoy's dissent. But although he dissented the great Russian expressed no surprise at the virulence of this diatribe. No doubt it voiced an opinion familiarized to him of late by many a newspaper of France and Germany. Fortunately for us, it is not quite true that foreign nations are a contemporaneous posterity. Yet the opinion of foreigners, even when most at fault, must have its value for us, as a useful corrective of conceit. We ought to be proud of our country, but we need not be vain about it. Indeed, it would be difficult for the most patriotic of us to find any satisfaction in the figure of the typical American which apparently exists in the minds of most Europeans, and which seems to be a composite photograph of the backwoodsman of Cooper, the negro of Mrs. Stowe and the Mississippi river folk of Mark Twain, modified, perhaps, by more vivid memories of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Surely this is a strange monster, and we need not wonder that foreigners feel toward it as Voltaire felt toward the prophet Habakuk, whom he declared to be "capable of anything."

A Parisian View.

It has seemed advisable to quote here what the Parisian journalist said of us, not because he himself is a person of consequence—indeed, he is so obscure that there is no need even to mention his name—but because he has had the courage to attempt what Burke declared to be impossible, to draw an indictment against a whole nation. It would be easy to retort on him in kind, for, unfortunately and to the grief of all her friends, France has laid herself open to accusations as sweeping and as violent. It would be easy to dismiss the man himself as one whose outlook on the world was so narrow that it seemed to be little more than what he could get through a chance slit in the wall of his own self-sufficiency. It would be easy to answer him in either of these fashions, but what is easy is rarely worth while, and it is wiser to weigh what he said and to see if we cannot find our profit in it.

Sifting the essential charges from out the mass of his malevolent accusations, we find this Frenchman alleging, first, that we Americans care chiefly for making money; secondly, that we are hostile to art and to all forms of beauty, and, thirdly, that we are devoid of ideals. These three allegations may well be considered in turn, one by one, beginning with the assertion that we are mere moneymakers.

Now, in so far as this Frenchman's belief is but an exaggeration of the saying of Napoleon that the English were a nation of shopkeepers we need not wince, for the Emperor of the French found to his cost that those same English shopkeepers had a stout stomach for fighting. Nor need we regret that we can keep shop profitably in these days when the doors of the bankers' vaults are the real gates to the Temple of Janus, war being impossible until they open. There is no reason for alarm or for apology so long as our shopkeeping does not cramp our muscle or curb our spirit, for, as Bacon declared three centuries ago, "walled towns, stored arsenals and armories, goodly races of horse, chariots of war, elephants, ordnance, artillery and the like—all this is but a sheep in a lion's skin, except the breed and disposition of the people be stout and warlike."

Even the hostile French traveller did not accuse us of any flabbiness of fibre; indeed, he declaimed especially against our "conquering appetite," which seemed to him scandalous "in a new people with no hereditary predisposition to war." But here he fell into a common blunder; the United States may be a new nation—although as a fact the stars and stripes is now older than the tricolor of France, the union jack of Great Britain and the standards of those newcomers among the nations Italy and Germany—the United States may be a new nation, but the people here have had as many ancestors as the population of any other country. The people here, moreover, have "a hereditary predisposition toward war," or at least toward adventure, since they are, every man of them, descended from some European more venturesome than his fellows, readier to risk the perils of the Western ocean and bolder to front the unknown dangers of an unknown land. The warlike temper, the aggressiveness, the imperialistic sentiment—these are in us no new development of unexpected ambition—and they ought not to surprise any one familiar with the way in which our forefathers grasped this Atlantic coast first, then thrust themselves across the Alleghenies, spread abroad to the Mississippi, and reached out at last to the Rockies and to the Pacific. The lust of adventure may be dangerous, but it is no new thing; it is in our blood, and we must reckon with it.

Perhaps it is because "the breed and disposition of the people" is "stout and warlike" that our shopkeeping has been successful enough to awaken envious admiration among other races whose energies may have relaxed of late. After all, the arts of war and the arts of peace are not so unlike, and in either a triumph can be won only by an imagination strong enough to foresee and to divine what is hidden from the weakling. We are a trading community, after all and above all, even if we come of fighting stock. We are a trading community just as Athens was, and Venice and Florence, and like the men of these earlier commonwealths, the men of the United States are trying to make money. They are striving to make money not solely to amass riches, but partly because having money is the outward and visible sign of success, because it is the most obvious measure of accomplishment.

The Love of Money

In his talk with Tolstoy our French critic revealed an unexpected insight when he asserted that the passion of American life was not so much the use of money as a delight in the conquest of it. Many an American man of affairs would admit without hesitation that he would rather make half a million dollars than inherit a million. It is the process he enjoys rather than the result; it is the tough tussle in the open market which gives him the keenest pleasure, and not the idle contemplation of wealth safely stored away. He girds himself for battle and fights for his own hand; he is the son and the grandson of the stalwart adventurers who came from the Old World to face the chances of the new. This is why he is unwilling to retire as men are wont to do in Europe when their fortunes are made. Merely to have money does not greatly delight him, although he would regret not having it, but what does delight him unceasingly is the fun of making it.

The money itself often he does not know what to do with, and he can find no more selfish use for it than to give it away. He seems to recognize that his making it was in some measure due to the unconscious assistance of the community as a whole, and he feels it his duty to do something for the people among whom he lives. It must be noted that the people themselves also expect this from him; they expect him sooner or later to pay his footing. As a result of this pressure of public opinion and of his own lack of interest in money itself, he gives freely. In time he comes to find pleasure in this as well, and he applies his business sagacity to his benefactions. Nothing is more characteristic of modern American life than this pouring out of private wealth for public service. Nothing remotely resembling it is to be seen now in any country of the Old World, and not even in Athens in its noblest days was there a larger handed lavishness of the individual for the benefit of the community.

The Prestige of Wealth

In no country of the Old World again is the prestige of wealth less powerful than it is here. This, of course, the foreigner fails to perceive; he does not discover that it is not the man who happens to possess money that we regard with admiration, but the man who is making money, and thereby proving his efficiency and indirectly benefiting the community. To many it may sound like an insufferable paradox to assert that nowhere in the civilized world to-day is money itself of less weight than here in the United States, but the broader his opportunity the more likely is an honest observer to come to this strange conculsion. Fortunes are made in a day almost, and they may fade away in a night; as the Yankee proverb puts it pithily, "It's only three generations from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves." Wealth is likely to lack something of its glamour in a land where well being is widely diffused and where a large proportion of the population have either had a fortune and lost it or else expect to gain one in the immediate future.

Probably also there is no country which now contains more men who do not greatly care for large gains and who have gladly given up money making for some other occupation they found more profitable for themselves. These are the men like Thoreau, in whose "Walden," now half a century old, we can find emphatic declaration of all the latest doctrines of the simple life. We have all heard of Agassiz—best of Americans, even though he was born in another republic; how he repelled the proffer of large terms for a series of lectures with the answer that he had no time to make money. Closely akin was the reply of a famous machinist in response to an inquiry as to what he had been doing, to the effect that he had accomplished nothing of late, "We've just been building engines and making money, and I'm about tired of it." And a few years ago a college professor of known ability declined the presidency of a trust company, which offered him a salary of at least five times what he was receiving. There are not a few men to-day in these United States who hold with Ben Jonson that "money never made any man rich—but his mind."

But while this is true, while there are some men among us who care little for money, and while there are many who care chiefly for the making of it, ready to share it when made with their fellow citizens, candor compels the admission that there are also not a few who are greedy and grasping, selfish and shameless, and who stand forward, conspicuous and unscrupulous, as if to justify to the full the aspersions which foreigners cast upon us. Although these men now manage for the most part to keep within the letter of the law their morality is that of the wrecker and of the pirate. It is a symptom of health in the body politic that the proposal has been made to inflict social ostracism upon the criminal rich. We need to stiffen our consciences and to set up a loftier standard of social intercourse, refusing to fellowship with the men who make their money by overriding the law or by undermining it—just as we should have declined the friendship of Captain Kidd before he had buried his stolen treasure.

In the immediate future these men will be made to feel that they are under the ban of public opinion. One sign of an acuter sensitiveness is the recent outcry against the acceptance of tainted money for the support of good works. Although it is well always to give a good deed the credit of a good motive, yet it is impossible sometimes not to suspect that certain large gifts have an aspect of conscience money, seeming to be the result of a desire to divert public attention from the evil way in which the money was made to the nobler manner in which it is spent. They appear to be the attempt of an outlaw to buy his peace with the community. Apparently there is many a rich man among us who, having sold his honor for a price, would now gladly give up the half of his fortune to get it back.

Candor compels the admission also that by the side of the criminal rich there exists the less noxious but more offensive class of the idle rich, who lead lives of wasteful luxury and of empty excitement. When the French reporter who talked with Tolstoy called us Americans "avid of pleasure" it must have been this little group that he had in mind, as he may have seen the members of it splurging about Paris, squandering and self-advertising. Although these idle rich exhibit themselves most openly and to least advantage in the capitals of Europe, their foolish doings are recorded superabundantly in our own newspapers; and thus their demoralizing influence is spread abroad. The snobbish reports of their misguided attempts at amusement may even be a source of danger in that they seem to recognize a false standard of social success or in that they may excite a miserable ambition to emulate these pitiful frivolities. But there is no need of delaying longer over the idle rich; they are only a few and they have doomed themselves to destruction, since it is an inexorable fact that those who break the laws of nature can have no hope of executive clemency.

Patience a little; learn to wait,
Years are long on the clock of fate.

The second charge which the wandering Parisian journalist brought against us was that we ignored the arts and that we despised disinterested beauty. Here again the answer that is easiest is not altogether satisfactory. There is no difficulty in declaring that there are American artists, both painters and sculptors, who have gained the most cordial appreciation in Paris itself, or in drawing attention to the fact that certain of the minor arts—that of the silversmith, for one, and for another that of the glass blower and the glass cutter—flourish in the United States at least as richly as they do anywhere else, while the art of designing in stained glass has had a new birth here which has given it a vigorous vitality lacking in Europe since the Middle Ages. It would not be hard to show that our American architects are now undertaking to solve new problems wholly unknown to the builders of Europe and that they are often succeeding in this grapple with unprecedented difficulty. Nor would it take long to draw up a list of the concerted efforts of certain of our cities to make themselves more worthy and more sightly with parks well planned and with public buildings well proportioned and appropriately decorated. We might even invoke the memory of the evanescent loveliness of the White City that graced the shores of Lake Michigan a few years ago; and we might draw attention again to the Library of Congress, a later triumph of the allied arts of the architect, the sculptor and the painter.

Taste in America.

But however full of high hope for the future we may esteem these several instances of our reaching out for beauty, we must admit—if we are honest with ourselves—that they are all more or less exceptional, and that to offset this list of artistic achievements the devil's advocate could bring forward a damning catalogue of crimes against good taste which would go far to prove that the feeling for beauty was dead here in America and also the desire for it. The devil's advocate would bid us consider the flaring and often vulgar advertisements that disfigure our highways, the barbaric ineptness of many of our public buildings, the squalor of the outskirts of our towns and villages, the hideousness and horror of the slums in most of our cities, the negligent toleration of dirt and disorder in our public conveyances, and many another pitiable deficiency of our civilization present in the mind of all of us.

The sole retort possible is a plea of confession and avoidance, coupled with a promise of reformation. These evils are evident and they cannot be denied. But they are less evident to-day than they were yesterday and we may honestly hope that they will be less evident to-morrow. The bare fact that they have been observed warrants the belief that unceasing effort will be made to do away with them. Once aroused public opinion will work its will in due season. And here occasion serves to deny boldly the justice of a part of the accusation which the French reporter brought against us. It may be true that we "ignore the arts"—although this is an obvious overstatement of the case; but it is not true that we despise beauty. However ignorant the American people may be as a whole, they are in no sense hostile toward art, as certain other peoples seem to be. On the contrary, they welcome it; with all their ignorance, they are anxious to understand it; they are pathetically eager for it. They are so desirous of it that they want it in a hurry, only too often to find themselves put off with an empty imitation. But the desire itself is indisputable, and its accomplishment is likely to be helped along by the constant commingling here of peoples from various other stocks than the Anglo-Saxon, since the mixture of races tends always to a swifter artistic development.

Native Germans

In the nineteenth century, in which we came to maturity as a nation, no one of the chief leaders of art, even including literature in its broadest aspects, and no one of the chief leaders in science was native to our country.

There is a sham idealism, boastful and shabby, which stares at the moon and stumbles in the mud, as Shelly did and Poe also. But the basis of the highest genius is always a broad commonsense. Shakespeare and Molière were held in esteem by their comrades for their understanding of affairs; and each of them had money out at interest. Sophocles was entrusted with command in battle, and Goethe was the shrewdest of the Grand Duke's counsellors. The idealism of Shakespeare and of Molière, of Sophocles and of Goethe, is like that of Emerson and of Lincoln; it is unfailingly practical. And thereby it is sharply set apart from the aristocratic idealism of Plato and of Renan, of Ruskin and of Nietzsche, which is founded on obvious self-esteem and which is sustained by arrogant and inexhaustible egotism. True idealism is not only practical, it is also liberal and tolerant.

The foundations of our commonwealth were laid by the sturdy Elizabethans who bore across the ocean with them their having of that imagination which in England flamed up in rugged prose and in superb and soaring verse. In two centuries and a half the sons of these stalwart Englishmen have lost nothing of their ability to see visions and to dream dreams, and to put solid foundations under their castles in the air. The flame may seem to die down for a season, but it springs again from the embers most unexpectedly, as it broke forth furiously in 1861. There was imagination at the core of the little war for the freeing of Cuba, the very attack on Spain which the Parisian journalist cited to Tolstoy as the proof of our predatory aggressiveness. We said that we were going to war for the sake of the ill used people in the suffering island close to our shores; we said that we would not annex Cuba; we did the fighting that was needful, and we kept our word. It is hard to see how even the most bitter of critics can discover in this anything selfish.

There was imagination also in the sudden stopping of all the steam craft, of all the railroads, of all the street cars, of all the incessant traffic of the whole nation at the moment when the body of a murdered Chief Magistrate was lowered into the grave. This pause in the work of the world was not only touching, it had a large significance to any one seeking to understand the people of these United States. It was a testimony that the Greeks would have appreciated; it had the bold simplicity of an Attic inscription. And we would thrill again in sympathetic response if it was in the pages of Plutarch that we read the record of another instance:—When the time arrived for Admiral Sampson to surrender the command of the fleet he had brought back to Hampton Roads, he came on deck to meet there only those officers whose prescribed duty required them to take part in the farewell ceremonies, as set forth in the regulations. But when he went over the side of the flagship he found that the boat which was to bear him ashore was manned by the rest of the officers, ready to row him themselves and eager to render this last personal service, and then from every other ship of the fleet there put out a boat also manned by officers to escort for the last time the commander whom they loved and honored.

American Idealism.

As another illustration of our regard for the finer and loftier aspects of life, consider our parks, set apart for the use of the people by the city, the State and the nation. In the cities of this new country the public playgrounds have had to be made, the most of them, at high cost, whereas the towns of the Old World have come into possession of them for nothing, more often than not inheriting the private recreation grounds of their rulers. And Europe has little or nothing to show similar either to the reservations of certain States, like the steadily enlarging preserves in the Catskills and the Adirondacks, or to the ampler national parks, the Yellowstone, the Yosemite and the Grand Cañon of the Colorado, some of them far larger in area than one at least of the original thirteen States. Overcoming the pressure of private greed the people have ordained the preservation of this natural beauty and its protection for all time, under the safe guardianship of the nation, and with free access to all who may claim admission to enjoy it.

In like manner many of the battle fields whereon the nation spent its blood that it might be what it is and what it hopes to be, these have been taken over by the nation itself and set apart and kept as holy places of pilgrimage. They are free from the despoiling hand of any individual owner. They are adorned with monuments recording the brave deeds of the men who fought there. They serve as constant reminders of the duty we owe to the country and of the debt we owe to those who made it and who saved it for us. And the loyal veneration with which these fields of blood have been cherished here in the United States finds no counterpart in any country in Europe, no matter how glorious may be its annals of military prowess. Even Waterloo is in private hands, and its broad acres, enriched by the bones of thousands, are tilled every year by the industrious Belgian farmers. Yet it was a Frenchman, Renan, who told us what welds men into a nation is "the memory of great deeds done in common and the will to accomplish yet more."

The Ethical Standard.

According to the theory of the conservation of energy, there ought to be about as much virtue in the world at one time as at another. According to the theory of the survival of the fittest, there ought to be a little more now than there was a century ago. We Americans to-day have our faults, and they are abundant enough and blatant enough, and foreigners take care that we shall not overlook them, but our ethical standard—however imperfectly we may attain to it—is higher than that of the Greeks under Pericles, of the Romans under Caesar, of the English under Elizabeth. It is higher even than that of our forefathers who established our freedom, as those know best who have most carefully inquired into the inner history of the American Revolution. In nothing was our advance more striking than in the different treatment meted out to the vanquished after the Revolution and after the civil war. When we made our peace with the British the native tories were proscribed, and thousands of loyalists left the United States to carry into Canada the indurated hatred of the exiled. But after Lee's surrender at Appomattox no body of men, no single man indeed, was driven forth to live an alien for the rest of his days; even though a few might choose to go, none was compelled.

This change of conduct on the part of those who were victors in the struggle was evidence of an increasing sympathy. Not only is sectionalism disappearing, but with it is departing the feeling that really underlies it, the distrust of those who dwell elsewhere than where we do. This distrust is still common all over Europe to-day. Here in America it has yielded to a friendly neighborliness which makes the family from Portland, Me., soon find itself at home in Portland, Ore. It is getting hard for us to hate anybody, especially since we have disestablished the devil. We are good natured and easy going. Herbert Spencer even denounced this as our immediate danger, maintaining that we were too good natured, too easy going, too tolerant of evil, and he insisted that we needed to strengthen our wills to protest against wrong and to grapple with it resolutely, and to overcome it before it is firmly rooted.